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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000490

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN, BARGHOUT
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [IS](#) [SA](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: JUMBLATT REMAINS WITH MARCH 14 DESPITE
TALKS WITH BERRI, WHILE HARIRI REPORTEDLY MEETS WITH
HIZBALLAH

REF: A. SECTO 00001 270050Z APR 09
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 470

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Meeting with Ambassador April 29, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt gave no indication he is planning to abandon the March 14 ship, despite recent overtures to opposition Speaker Nabih Berri. March 14 had much work to do to win the June 7 parliamentary elections, he admitted, listing several problem areas. However, the March 14 coalition intended to present a unified front and message via a joint meeting and statement prior to the elections. Meanwhile, majority leader Saad Hariri was meeting with Hizballah, Jumblatt revealed, a move Jumblatt deemed useful for reducing Sunni/Shia tensions.

[1](#)2. (C) Jumblatt had no immediate plans to visit Patriarch Sfeir to repair damage caused by his leaked comments criticizing the Maronites, believing the issue to be passe. Jumblatt wondered when the Saudis would turn the tap back on for funding, noting that this could be helpful in key electoral districts. Just minutes before the Special Tribunal announced its decision to recommend the release of the four generals, Jumblatt confirmed March 14 would accept the Tribunal's verdict. End summary.

STILL ON BOARD WITH MARCH 14

[1](#)3. (C) A relaxed and upbeat Jumblatt greeted the Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, at his Beirut home in Clemenceau on April 29. He praised the Secretary's June 26 visit to Lebanon (Ref A), stating it was very effective in conveying the message (of supporting the moderate March 14 coalition) without appearing "political." March 14 still had outstanding problems to fix, he admitted. Jumblatt, who had met with coalition leader Saad Hariri one-on-one on April 26 and then shared dinner with Saad on April 27 at the home of Druze Transport Minister Ghazi Aridi, said March 14 leaders (including Nassib Lahoud, Nayla Mouawad, Boutros Harb and others) planned to meet soon. They would also issue a

10-point statement shortly before the elections to reiterate the coalition's position on various issues and to promote an image of unity.

NO PLANS TO SEE PATRIARCH

¶4. (C) Jumblatt believed that the incident surrounding his leaked remarks criticizing his coalition partners and Maronite Christians had blown over. Asked whether he intended to visit Patriarch Sfeir soon to soothe ruffled Christian feathers, Jumblatt said he had not decided whether to visit him before or after the June 7 parliamentary elections. The Ambassador asked what the downside to a pre-election visit to Sfeir would be, to which Jumblatt had no response. It would not help or matter to March 14 Christians if he went, he later explained, citing his recent condolence calls on five Christian families in his Chouf district who were largely unconcerned with his statement. He had dispatched fellow Druze MP and Minister of State Wael Abu Four to meet with the Patriarch, who told Abu Four March 14 should do its best to make sure opposition Christian leader Michel Aoun does not win, Jumblatt reported.

SOOTHING MORE RUFFLED FEATHERS...

¶5. (C) Jumblatt deemed the decision not to include March 14 stalwart Nassib Lahoud on the Metn list as "stupid," blaming Kataeb leader Amine Gemayel, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, and independent Michel Murr. "Everyone is looking to

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see what are the advantages of Sarkis Sarkis," he asked sarcastically, referring to the April 27 announcement of Murr's "Salvation List" for Metn, which included Sarkis as the Maronite candidate. He further criticized Geagea's insistence on naming Lebanese Forces candidate Eddy Abillamaa to the list. (Note: The Metn list includes Kataeb candidates Sami Gemayel and Elie Karame, Abillamaa, and independents Murr, Sarkis, Elias Mukheiber, and Emile Kanaan. End note.)

¶6. (C) Jumblatt praised Lahoud's gracious reaction in stating that while he would fight his enemies, he would not turn against his friends. Nevertheless, March 14 needed to compensate Lahoud, perhaps by having Lahoud host a meeting of the four coalition leaders (Hariri, Geagea, Jumblatt and Gemayel) to demonstrate coalition unity. (Note: The four have not met as a group since April 9. End note.)

¶7. (C) As for Tripoli MP Mosbah Ahdab (also omitted from the March 14 list but running independently), Jumblatt attributed the decision to oust him to an agreement between Hariri and former PM Najib Mikati. Jumblatt had argued in favor of Jean Obeid (also close to Mikati), citing his 2004 refusal to participate in the cabinet decision to renew the extension of then-President Emile Lahoud, but neither Obeid nor Ahdab made the cut. Instead, he complained, they chose a "nobody" like Ahmed Karame (cousin of former PM Omar Karame and a former MP in Tripoli). Jumblatt believed Ahdab, however, could still play a role in March 14 if "somewhere behind the curtain" Hariri and Mikati decided to pursue this.

¶8. (C) As for Hariri's failure to reach an agreement with Jemaa Islamiya, Jumblatt argued that the Sunni group should accept Hariri's offer of one seat in Beirut with the promise of a cabinet seat following the elections. (Note: This is unlikely at this point. End note.)

...AND DEALING WITH TROUBLEMAKERS

¶9. (C) When asked about former Hariri advisor Ghattas Khoury (who defied his boss by running against his wishes in Jumblatt's Chouf district, pitting himself against Geagea's

George Adwan and Jumblatt's Dory Chamoun), Jumblatt simply said, "Saad doesn't need him any more." During their April 27 meeting, Saad had promised to do his best to convince Khoury not to run, he said.

¶10. (C) Jumblatt cited Beirut I and Zahle as problematic districts. In Beirut I, Geagea insisted on running an unknown Armenian candidate (Richard Kouyoumjian -- an Amcit) against incumbent Serge Torsarkissian. In Zahle, March 14 needed to decide between two Shia candidates (Okab Sakr, favored by Hariri, and Mohsen Dalloul, more popular locally, with Dalloul threatening to form a competing list with independent Paul Charbel, already passed over by March 14 in favor of Elie Marouni). Hariri had promised to resolve both the Shia and Charbel problems, Jumblatt said. Jumblatt also cited "coordination problems" in Baabda, citing Bassen Shab by name and accusing independent (and son-in-law of Michel Murr) Edmond Ghorios of working on his own -- a bad sign, he said. Batroun and Jbeil would fall to March 8, he predicted.

JUMBLATT MEETS WITH BERRI...

¶11. (C) The Ambassador asked about the prospects for a middle bloc aligned with President Sleiman (which some speculate would include both Jumblatt and Berri). Jumblatt said Sleiman was frustrated with both March 8 and March 14. Jumblatt favored enhancing the role of the president, but added that this would make Lebanon's Sunnis and Shias nervous.

¶12. (C) Noting he would meet with Speaker Berri the following day (April 30), Jumblatt admitted that Hariri had been

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nervous about his rapprochement with the Speaker. Hariri, he explained, was not "keen to fix up a deal" with Berri at this time, preferring to wait until after the elections. Nor was Hizballah "keen on rapprochement" between the two. Jumblatt believed Berri would remain Speaker after the elections.

...WHILE HARIRI MEETS WITH HIZBALLAH

¶13. (C) Jumblatt revealed that Hariri had been meeting with Hizballah's Hassan Khalil, which he praised as a way to reduce tensions and tone down political rhetoric. (Comment: This is a bit of news Hariri has refrained from sharing with us; we will pursue. End comment.) Jumblatt deemed Hizballah's activities in Egypt a mistake, declaring this was the second time Hizballah had helped March 14, following its appeal to the Egyptian army revolt against the government during the January Gaza crisis. The military side of Hizballah was dominating the political side, he said. MP Mohamad Raad's recent statement calling for the "abolishment of the state but not the sects" was yet another mistake, he said. Jumblatt believed Hizballah would seek to hold on to key service ministries such as Health and Labor after the elections.

ALL AGREE: KEEP THINGS CALM

¶14. (C) Jumblatt did not believe there would be serious incidents of violence in the run-up to the elections, noting that his Chouf and Aley districts were calm following his agreement with opposition Druze leader Talal Arslan to give Arslan a seat in Aley. Tripoli had the most potential for security problems, he said, adding that Internal Security Forces chief General Ashraf Rifi needed to do more to protect the Sunnis there. Jumblatt agreed that the April 28 National Dialogue's reiteration of the need for calm during the electoral period was an indication that it was in no one's interest to stir up trouble.

SAUDI INTENTIONS UNCLEAR

¶15. (C) Jumblatt again confirmed reports we have been hearing for months that the Saudis have stopped providing funding to assist March 14 in its election campaign. Noting that former Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon (now Saudi's Minister of State) Abdulaziz Khoja had recently made a 24-hour visit to Lebanon, during which he met with both Hariri and Speaker Berri, Jumblatt wondered when the Saudis would again "turn on the faucet." The Saudis could help make a difference especially in Zahle and Beirut I, he said. Asked whether Hariri would be the next Prime Minister in the event of a March 14 victory, Jumblatt said this was up to Saudi King Abdullah.

RESIGNATION REGARDING
RELEASE OF FOUR GENERALS

¶16. (C) Regarding the imminent decision by the Special Tribunal on whether to release the four generals in Lebanese custody, Jumblatt, citing Hariri, said March 14 must accept whatever verdict the court hands down. The Ambassador suggested that whatever the decision, March 14 should stress the Tribunal's adherence to the rule of law and non-politicization. (Note: The Tribunal's announcement came just after we left Jumblatt's home; Hariri held a press conference at 6 pm the same evening, in which he welcomed the decision as proof the Tribunal was not politicized and was effective in starting its work. End note.)

COMMENT

¶17. (C) Jumblatt's nonchalance regarding a visit to the Maronite Patriarch surprised us. Nonetheless, the Patriarch

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has said publicly (on new MTV-Murr Television station) in an April 26 interview that Jumblatt had personally justified his statements, adding that Jumblatt "also clarified the matter to us through delegating Minister of State Wael Abu Faour, who told us that the PSP and its leader respect the patriarchy." "In any case, we respect MP Jumblatt, and I do not think that what he said has greatly affected the historical 2001 reconciliation in the Mountain (between the Druze and the Maronites) especially since he clarified what he wanted to say," Sfeir added. Nonetheless, Jumblatt's slamming of the Sunnis and calling the Maronites "a bad breed" continues to rankle many we talk to. Finally, while a March 14 meeting and statement of unity prior to the elections will help the coalition's image with the voting public, March 14 candidate problems in Baabda, Beirut I, Zahle, the Chouf, Jbeil, and elsewhere have yet to be resolved. End comment.

SISON